

## CHANGE OF SUBJECT IN MUYUW<sup>1</sup>

Mr. David R. Lithgow is a translator of the Muyuw language, spoken on Woodlark Island, in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.

### Potential Ambiguity

Muyuw verbs are all clearly transitive or intransitive. They have a prefix which indicates the person of the subject, as well as the number for first person. Transitive verbs have suffixes which indicate the person of the object, and some indication of number, although there is some ambiguity between plural subjects and plural objects. When there is no suffix on a transitive verb, the object is third person singular.

An example of a transitive verb-stem and affixes is:

*i-mek-eig*

he, she or it - came to meet - me.

Free-form subjects or objects may be pronouns, nouns or noun-phrases. Free-form subjects and objects are most commonly adjacent to the affixes with which they are in apposition. Thus the preferred or least ambiguous word-order is subject-verb-object. However, variation is so extensive that one could be tempted to believe that word-order is random. On closer examination, it appears that the focus of a clause or sentence is mentioned first, whether it be the subject, verb or object. The focus is often followed by *gog*, *go*, *geg* or *ge* to add emphasis. There are systematic patterns of word-order which I have described in a linguistic paper being prepared for publication.

Complexity is increased by the fact that subject may be changed without change of focus, and vice-versa. The greatest area of potential ambiguity is when the subject is the third person, for the gender distinctions of European languages are lacking. Also the form is the same for third person object whether the subject or object is plural, or both. Thus *i-nek-es* can mean "he or she or it went to meet them"

or "they went to meet him or her or it"

or "they went to meet them".

This area of potential ambiguity in translation led me to investigate the means by which change of subject is indicated in Muyuw. The first point to be established was the position of a free-form subject, if present.

### Position of Free-form Subject

1. When the persons are first or second, ambiguity is unlikely, so that verbs with appropriate prefixes indicate the full meaning accurately, and free-form subjects may be absent entirely.

<sup>1</sup> MUYUW is a Melanesian language, spoken on Woodlark Island in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. It belongs to the Dobu language family, and is closely related to the Kiriwina (Kilivila) language of the Trobriand Islands.

*Ga ku-douw, b-ei-tam-s, b-a-ligen.*

When you-call, unreal-3rd-answer-pl., unreal-I-hear.

When you call, they will answer, and I will hear.

2. Free-form subjects may precede the verb.

*As-tei-y so-n bwad-an m-ei-kuk-s; yey, Wilson, Mak na-ka-ses.*

Their-men-two companion-his younger brother-his real-3rd-sail-pl.;

I, Wilson, Mark real-we(exclusive)-stayed.

Those two men, he with his younger brother, had sailed off;

Wilson, Mark and I stayed behind.

*Ku-se-sus; yey bo b-a-noun.*

You-continuously-stay; I emphatically unreal-I-go along.

You stay here; I will be going.

It should be noted that there is potential ambiguity with a transitive verb and free-form object preceding the verb, and no free-form subject.

3. If the subject is not the focus of the clause, a free-form subject, if present, will follow the verb. Less commonly if the object or indirect (associated) object is the focus, it may be followed by the subject, and then the verb.

*i-mwen i-n wa-nakaew; i-kalouw kwadoy; i-kalouw mtowen Simkulikul*

he-climbed he-went on-high; it-fell possum; he-fell that person

Simkulikul.

he climbed up (the tree); the possum fell, and Simkulikul fell.

*ag-es yakamey nag ka-ligen.*

speech-their we(exclusive) not we(excl.)-hear.

We do not comprehend their speech.

With extensive areas of potential ambiguity, the following devices narrow down the context, and reduce or eliminate ambiguity between the actors in a discourse.

1. The marker of a plural object is omitted to emphasize that an ambiguous subject is singular and not plural. In the following example there is one lad contending with a group of older brothers, and the subject of the first verb is the lad.

*i-mek, bo i-kalavis*

he-come to meet (them), emphatically they-rowed off.

Possible ambiguity is increased here because the plural marker of an intransitive verb-stem, which is *-s*, has fused with the final *s* of the stem which means "to row off", so that it is not clear whether the second verb is singular or plural. In unambiguous contexts "he came to meet them" would be *imekes*, which can also mean "they came to meet him, or them". Thus the form of the first verb as used can only be understood as the action of a single person, and the second verb refers to the brothers—"He came to join them, but they had rowed off."

2. Direct speech is always preferred. Indirect speech occurs, but is rare. In one folk-tale a female monster asks a woman if her skirt suits her, and she answers that it suits her. This is rendered in the following dramatic discourse without indicating who the speakers are, and yet in direct speech it is quite clear. The monster is the first speaker.

“*Dab-eim ku-nib, ku-mey, b-a-sikam.*” *I-nib i-sek.*

*I-livan, “Ku-kin i-kwan-eig?”*

“Skirt-your you-remove, you-give to me, unreal-I-put on.”

She-removed-it she-gave-her. She-said, “You-look it-suits-me?”

“Take off your skirt and give it to me to put on.” She took it off and gave it to her to put on. She said,

“Look. Does it suit me?”

“*O i-kwan-eim.*” “*Kwane-kwan-eigu, kwan-eig.*”

“Yes, it-suits-you.” “Suits-suits-me; suits-me.”

(This last answer from the female monster is a happy song of paralanguage which omits subject prefixes.)

3. Most nouns are possessed. The three distinctions of possession, (intimate, intermediate and distant), carry a high functional load in clarifying contexts which may otherwise be ambiguous.

*I-kuk-s, i-n-eis Loloman; gwad townen digumasus i-kamgway-es;*

They-sailed-pl., they-went to-pl. Loloman; child that youngest they-neglected him-pl.;

They sailed off to Loloman; neglecting that youngest child;

*i-se-sun-wan wa-si-ven.*

He-continuously-stayed-actually at-their-village.

He stayed (was left) at home.

The words “village” or “house” or “home” we would not expect to find possessed in similar contexts in English or Greek. Such words are usually possessed in Muyuw. In this case it is made clear that the child stayed at the parents’ village, and not the village they were visiting. The child is the object of the clause in which he is first mentioned, but as the focus he is mentioned first, and he becomes the unstated subject of the next clause. The clause in which the child is mentioned could mean that he neglected his parents. We know that the subject has not changed in this clause because of the total context, assisted by the possession of the final noun of the sentence.

Actors in a discourse are usually referred to in terms of their relationship to each other, e.g. *bud-as* “younger sibling-their (their young brother)”.

4. There is a frequent usage of verb-stems which include locational particles. By recording the direction of movement of all actors, the total context is kept clear, so that the subject of each clause is evident, even when not in focus. The commonest locational particles are:

- m to the speaker
- w to close distance (or hearer)
- n away from speaker and hearer
- y beside speaker and hearer.

Other particles convey such information as "uphill", "downhill", "across water", etc. Translated literally into a European language they sound redundant, but seem to be necessary in Muyuw narrative if it is to be clear.

*I-lana, "Tam-ag bo n-ei-m". I-n-eis, i-ta-lag-s.*

He-said thus, "Father-my really real-he-comes." They-go-pl., they-beach-arrive-pl.

These five phonological words contain the following information:

The speaker sees his father coming in his direction and says so. Then the subject changes to his father and becomes plural (to include the crew), they go past the speaker and on to a beach where they come ashore.

5. When the initial verb of a sentence is the same as the final verb of the previous sentence (with or without aspect variation) the subject is the same.

*Mounid i-gu-guy-ena nat-un i-kous, mo i-noun.*

Truly she-continuously-exhorted-him offspring-her it-finished, then he-continuously went.

When she had finished instructing her child, he went off.

*I-n i-toupan dakul waseg; i-ses, i-kayamat tam-an.*

He-went he-hid rock at; he-stayed, he-waited for father-his.

He went and hid at a rock, and stayed there, waiting for his father.

*Tam-an gog bo i-n-eis Siblaboul, i-poul-s sin-s-in-ey.*

Father-his however really they-went to -pl. Siblaboul, they-fished with nets-pl. together-companion-his-plural.

However his father and his companions went to Siblaboul fishing with nets.

*I-pla-poul-s ee . . . bo i-kwayav.*

They-continuously-fished with nets-pl. lapse of time really it-afternoon. They kept fishing until afternoon.

This grammatical device preserves the continuity of discourse, so that subject-change can be more readily detected.

In the first sentence an action is signified as completed, and one of the two persons went away. Repetition of the final verb at the beginning of the next sentence makes it clear from the context of the second sentence that the actor is the child.

In the second sentence the object of the last verb is his father. His father is the focus of the third sentence, and part of the subject of the first and second verbs of this sentence.

The second verb is then repeated in its continuous aspect as the focus of the fourth sentence, while the subject remains the same.

This example illustrates the frequent possession of nouns in Muyuw, and the use of relationship terms for the free-form subjects or objects in narrative discourse. This has the advantage of being more specific, and overcoming cultural taboo against the use of personal names of those to whom respect is due.

In Bible-translation it is risky to assume that readers will have full understanding of the background and context, especially if the grammatical signals are ignored which may directly indicate subject-change, or which

clarify the context so that the subject is evident. This mistake has been made in one published translation of Matt. 1:25 (He knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.) As translated, this verse can have many meanings. It reads: "He /she /it was not knowing /understanding him /her /it until later he /she /it gave birth to his /her /its male offspring; and he /she /it called him /her /it Jesus." In the context it probably means that Joseph (or Mary) did not understand God's commandment given in the dream until her son was born. Here the translator needed a euphemism such as "sleep with" to indicate sexual intercourse, to translate the euphemism "know" in the original. Even if this mistake were corrected, subjects are still ambiguous, notably the person who named the child. Grammatical devices should have been sought in this language to make this as clear as it is in the original.

In the concluding section some passages are listed which illustrate the application of this study in Bible translation in the Muyuw language.

### Application to Translation

#### 1. Placement of free-form subject (if required) when it is not in focus.

##### (a) *Object focus*

Matt. 13:30 (Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.) This is rendered:  
*Awuyow wanamug kwatikunakus, kusunaves, kukwawes, kunawes, kugabus;*

Weeds at-first you-gather-it, you-bundle-it, you-carry-it, you-take-it-away, you-burn-it;

*ikous, mo wit kwatikunakus kunawes wagunseigous.*

completed, then wheat you-gather-it you-carry-it-away to-my-foodhouse.

##### (b) *Verb focus*

Matt. 20:34 (Jesus in pity touched their eyes.) This is rendered:  
*Ikalin-nuwan Yeisuw, ikabkwen mites.*

He-was-pitiful Jesus, he-touched-it their-eyes.

In this case the word-order coincides with the Greek, while differing from the English word-order.

#### 2. Omission of marker of plural object.

Matt. 26:26 (and gave it to the disciples) rendered:

*ivgen, isek navamul*

he-distributed-it, he-gave-to (transitive) his-disciples.

In an early draft I had *isekes* (he gave to them), but this plural marker was rejected by informants. Though literally correct, it could also mean "his disciples gave it to him". In the preferred rendering the subject is clearly singular, and must be Jesus.

#### 3. Direct speech preferred.

Matt. 2:16 (Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent . . .) This is rendered:

*Elod nikayamat tasiyas tasinaps, ikayamat ee . . . nag; nanon ilana, "O bo ikatidavigs." Kapasal nuwan, ikayabes . . .*

Herod he-waited-for those wise-men, he-waited time-passed nothing (happened); his-mind he-said, "Oh really they-deceived-me." Furious his-insides, he-sent-them . . .

A group of senior men was unhappy with a fairly literal translation of this passage, but they could not think of ways to improve it. When a young man suggested the above rendering, the old men broke into wide smiles of approval.

Matt. 14:22 (Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the opposite side, while he dismissed the crowd.)

*Ikous, mo idibakes navamul, ilana, "Kutouws kumugwas, kusupels kuneis palatan; yey gog bases bakayabes gamag."*

It-finished, then he-told-them his-disciples, he-said, "You-embark, you-go-first, you-go-across-water, you-go-to other-side; I but I-will-stay I-will-send-them people."

#### 4. Possession of Nouns

Matt. 13:34 (All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables.) Rendered:

*Sinap tasiyas babaw Yeisuw isekes gamag babaw, nakabebay waseg.*  
Information these all Jesus he-gave-to-them people many, his-parables with.

In this case the focus and word-pattern is the same in the Greek, the R.S.V., and Muyuw. The subject of "gave" could be "many people" or "Jesus". This is clarified by the possession of "parables" with the singular "his".

#### 5. Frequent use of verbs with locational particles.

Matt. 3:12 (but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire). Rendered:

*simwan gog bisen bigigob kov tuta babaw*  
its-rubbish but he-will-put-at-distance, it-will-keep burning-it fire  
time all  
(he will put its rubbish at a distance, fire will continuously burn it).

6. Repetition of a sentence final verb at beginning of the next sentence, indicating same subject.

Matt. 2:4 (Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he enquired of them where the Christ was to be born.)

*Iliwan meivek tasiyas tanugwes lun, sisiyas takatimlakeins kaleiwag, katuyouns bimeis.*

He-told all those rulers-of peace-offering, with the-teachers-of law, they-gather they-will-come-here.

*Imeis mo ikatigan, "Kelis avanuy mikopwayas?"*

They-came, then he-interrogated-them, "Christ where she-gives-birth-to-him?"

Here the repetition of the verb "come" provides flow of discourse, with same object.

When selecting this verse as an example, I noted that I had the morphemically correct second verb of the final sentence *i-katigan-es* ("he-interrogated-them"), which could also mean, "they interrogated him"; so I omitted the plural marker and tested it with informants. With the word given in the isolated context of one man speaking to several, they said that it should have the plural marker; but in the context of the full discourse, they preferred to omit it. Thus a rule of word affixation is broken because of grammatical requirements at a higher level. Perhaps we can find this sort of thing in many languages—attraction of the case of Greek nouns to something which is semantically clear but grammatically incorrect at the word-level of analysis. In English also we have lucid utterances such as "It is me" which are forbidden by our grammatical purists.

This brief study has helped me to handle the Muyuw language more precisely for the purpose of Bible translation, and it is presented in the hope that it may be of some use to other translators, especially those who work with Melanesian languages.

RUDOLF KASSÜHLKE

## PROBLEMS OF BIBLE TRANSLATING IN EUROPE TODAY

The Reverend Rudolf Kassühlke, translator of Fulani and German, is a Translations Adviser for the United Bible Societies in Europe.

*In this article the Reverend Rudolf Kassühlke takes a close look at some of the prevailing attitudes toward translation as may be seen among some European scholars. He argues that the purposes and aims of the translator will determine in a large way the kind of translation he will produce. This article, originally intended for a German audience, appeared under the title "Die Bibel in der Welt" in the Yearbook of the German Bible Societies, 1970, and has been translated into English for readers of The Bible Translator.* (Editor)

Anyone who has carefully followed the figures issued by the Bible Societies will certainly have noticed the steep increase in the number of languages in which there are now portions of the Bible. The figure was about 850 in 1930, and more than 1,400 at the end of 1969. At present scholars are translating books of the Bible into about 800 languages.

If anyone thinks that this refers only to languages of the so-called "Third World", he is making a very great mistake. An enquiry into the position of Bible translating in Europe has shown that 139 new translations or revisions of the Bible or part of the Bible have been begun or published in 36 European